

***“The learner, the educator, and evolving
teaching methods: the voice of Irish Educators
at ICEP 2010”***

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Abstract

During the ICEP 2010 conference, an armchair session was made available to attendees. The purpose of the session was to capture the voice of the Irish educator on a number of topics. These topics were identified as, the role of the educator, the learner profile, teaching methods, and assessment. The session was highly successful and yielded a substantial volume of material which was analysed using a grounded theory approach. This paper summarises some of the preliminary findings from the session which highlight the importance of these themes to the Irish educator. The methodology adopted was informed by Appreciative Inquiry and these findings represent the early stages of this endeavour i.e. capturing what has worked and what we do well.

Introduction

Creating an engaging learning environment is crucial for educators today. ICEP (International Conference for Engaging Pedagogy¹) seeks to support lecturers in addressing this challenge of creating a dynamic and engaging learning environment. A key success factor in achieving this has been to offer practitioners an opportunity to share their experiences with each other. Over the years, the conference has grown from strength to strength, attracting the attention of many prominent members of the teaching and learning community. This is evidenced in the caliber and diversity of papers being presented to date and by the relentless commitment of the programme committee. The conference, which is now in its fourth year, was first held in Griffith College Dublin and more recently at University College Dublin and at the National University of Ireland, Maynooth.

Research Method

The approach adopted for this research study was informed by the philosophy of appreciative inquiry. Described as “the study of what gives life to human systems when they are at their best....and with the belief that through human communications (inquiry and dialogue) people can shift their attention and action away from problem analysis to lift up worthy ideals and

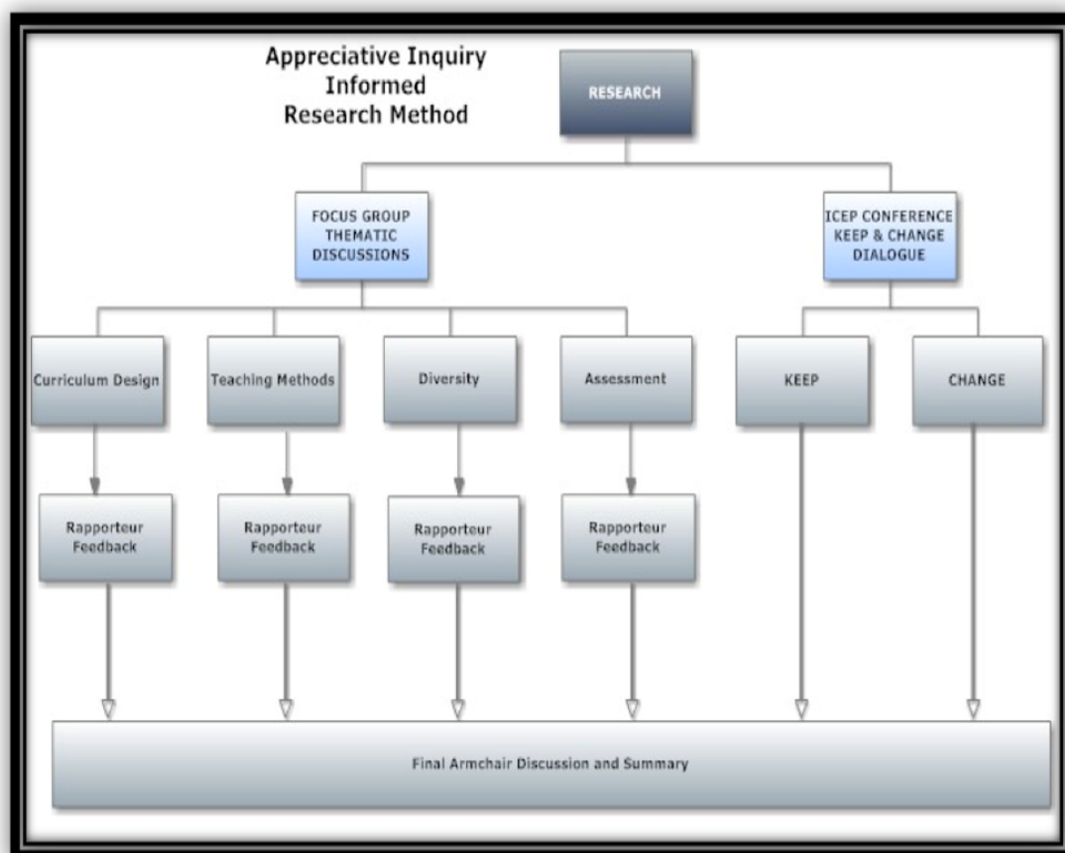
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ICEP homepage: <http://www.icep.ie>

productive possibilities for the future” (www.positivechange.org). The challenge for this piece of research was to provide a framework to allow the participants shape and change the future positioning of the conference. In particular it was important to celebrate what is good and to use this as the basis for improvements and enhancements.

The approach to the armchair session is captured in Figure 1 below. The opening session set the scene for the afternoon. Each participant was assigned to a focus group (based on a coloured sticker on their name badge), Each discussion was recorded and key points captured by the rapporteur on a flipchart. The structured focus groups allowed for an open discussion on the main theme. This did not preclude or discourage other topics to be included in the ensuing discussion, as is evident from the transcribed recordings. It was recognised from the outset that the key themes were signposts to provide initial direction rather than hard-edged boundaries.

Figure 1: The Research Method



These parallel sessions were followed by a general feedback forum where the rapporteur presented a summary of the key comments and observations captured. These presentations were also recorded and subsequently transcribed. The final activity was a “Keep and Change” exercise – where each participant was presented with a final opportunity to using post-it notes to add their priority items to the “keep” and “change” flipcharts arranged around the room. The opinions and views captured as part of this exercise do not form part of the data that was analysed for this paper.

Our motivation was that, by adopting the principles of appreciative inquiry, we could build on what is positive and appreciated within the ICEP community and envision how this could be improved.

Research Process

A grounded theory approach was used to analyse the data captured in the inquiry. Although the researchers had a collective body of knowledge regarding pedagogy, it was vital that they did not initially engage in any focused or directed literature review. Glaser and Straus (1967), founders of grounded theory, argue that in order to approach research in as bias free a manner as possible, one must not engage with the literature. In particular, Glaser (1978) was of the belief that the literature might ‘desensitize’ the researcher. He believed that in order to allow theory to ‘emerge’, it is best to keep an open and creative mind.

In order to analyse the data the researchers totally immersed themselves in the data. This was done individually and then collectively. Working individually, notable points in the transcripts were flagged. Collectively, discussions ensued on the significance of the points noted. This allowed constructs to be derived from the data (Gall et al 2007). Atlas.ti was used to assist the coding and annotation of the findings. The software was primarily used to code and visualise complex relations between the data.

The final aspect of initial data coding involved confirming the in-vivo codes and either reclassifying or deleting them. This process aided the next phase which was classifying the codes into families. The motivation for the family codes was based on working up from granular to macro view. Determination of which family each code was assigned to was based on the name of the initial code. Most of the codes were assigned to families in the first phase of this process. In the second phase, codes not yet assigned to families were analysed. In some cases codes were merged, and in other cases after reconsideration the codes were

assigned to a family. In many instances, codes were assigned to more than one family. Once each code was assigned to at least one family co-occurring codes were examined. At times, this involved re-examining the original data transcripts to further discuss and agree how the co-occurrence ought to be handled.

Once all data had been coded, and families constructed, each code family was examined to confirm codes were assigned in an accurate manner to each family. This was verified through the examination of quotes in the raw data. At this point, attention was paid to further possible links to codes that may have been overlooked during the earlier analysis.

Findings and Discussion

Four broad code families emerged from the analysis: the role of the educator, the learner profile, teaching methods, and assessment. In this section, the findings within each code family are discussed.

The Role of the Educator

The participants presented valuable commentary on some of the key topics in higher education today including the profile of learners; the impact of national policy and the importance of scholarship in teaching and learning.

The discussions demonstrated how the participants' underlying values and beliefs continued to inform their practice. The most dominant key influences were their family of origin where there was a strong “.....*respect for education within the household*”. In some instances their early experiences, both positive and negative, of educators helped forge their interests. Some encountered an “*excellent teacher*” but others had “*good and bad memories from particularly the National School*”. A strong sense of the need to contribute positively to the lives of their students was evident and in some instances “*to be able to completely change persons lives*”.

The value of understanding and exploring the values and beliefs of teachers has been recognised by several authors who have referred to the powerful effect of beliefs and claimed that this is more useful in understanding and predicting how teachers make decisions (Pajares, 1992)

Transferring the love of their subject was also seen as a critical element in creating an engaging learning environment. It was also felt that there should be affection between the educator and their class. This characteristic is seen by Hogan (2010, p.81) as “One of the

most distinctive things about teaching as a form of human action is that it involves a particular kind of love. This includes a love of what one teaches and a love of those whom one teaches, or more precisely, a creative combination of both”.

The strength of their values and beliefs can be seen by the observation that for some even bureaucratic procedures are answerable to the practitioner's own value system - *“I will break HETAC² or any rule if I feel it is incompatible with my value system”*.

Such opinions articulated in a public forum by educators are often absent from public debate.

A situation lamented by Lent and Pipkins (2003, p.142) who comment that “It is frightening to consider that those with the courage to defend the ideals that make education more than a bureaucratic progress report are the few voices opposing the decay that is infusing education”.

The dynamic nature of their role was very evident as the participants described how they responded to increased accountability in areas such as continuous curriculum development: *“this idea of accountability and clarity in how you do your job and that is coming across more and more in things like curriculum development, from a lecturer’s point of view”*. This changing role is also witnessed most starkly in the change of vocabulary. The dominant discourse now for many has become the myriad of process and procedures associated with the mechanics of quality assurance. The learner and the challenges posed by increasing diversity amongst the learner population is still a central tenet for many educators.

The challenge of responding to the increasing demands presented by the evolving learner profile has initiated a focused reflection on current practice. This has enhanced the status of inquiries into the scholarship of teaching and learning. This challenge has presented an opportunity for many as one contributor commented quoting Dewey: *“... ‘Unless they learn nothing has been taught’ and I think we have to keep that in mind.”*

The Learner Profile

Despite the rapid pace of change in their profession, participants in the conference were concerned with discussing, understanding and facilitating their students. These discussions

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The Irish Higher Education and Training Awards Council – www.hetac.ie

touched on a number of themes. Interestingly enough, nostalgia was a recurring theme among participants.

Many attendees expressed some sort of admiration for the educational institutions of the past and questioned motivations of present day students (*"it is a whole different ball game than 50 years ago when maybe those who went were more motivated to go"*). In discussions where past educational practices and motivations were touched upon, the conversation rarely turned one of the greatest changes to hit third-level education in recent times, namely that of wider access. However, some participants did refer to a diversity of ability which is a natural consequence of this wider access.

There was some debate around mature students. Some participants observed that mature students were disadvantaged in comparison to their younger peers, *"children coming through from primary school level that have been open to all of this technology"*. Other participants felt that that mature students were generally more motivated because many saw a direct need for a professional qualification, particularly if they were already working in a related area.

In the context of diversity, the issue of increasing numbers of international students in the classroom arose. Language issues dominated, but cultural differences were also cited as an issue when teaching international students. One of the major concerns was the difficulty in getting students to express themselves. It was also recognized that, as a consequence of the mobile labour market, that cultural diversity also existed even among the national student body. Participants also expressed an interest in a deeper analysis of the reasons why international students choose to travel to their chosen countries of study.

A substantial amount of discussion (although not much argument) took place around the observation that present-day students seem overly assessment-driven (*"....they really look and they say, 'Where do I get the grades?'"*). Instead of simply blaming the students or external reasons for this situation, the participants were more interested in how they as educators are to blame (*"We are reducing everything to 'marks'"*) and how it can be addressed.

Assessment

Assessment issues featured significantly throughout all sessions, one of the most significant discussion points was the impact traditional assessment methods have on students.

There was broad agreement that students today are excessively focused on grades; evidenced by numerous comments, such as, *“where do I get the grades?”*, *“I need a grade”*, *“the value being the piece of paper they get”*, *“we almost assess everything because if you tell students it is not being assessed they don’t do it”*. Ultimately, the collective perception of students' belief is *“it is the result that counts rather than the process you go through to get there”*. Rust (2002), in his review of the literature on the impact of assessment on student learning provides evidence that many students won't pay attention to exercises that do not lead to marks, or if they do, it is only in a perfunctory way.

Boud *et al* (1999) describes assessment as the single most powerful influence on learning in formal courses and argues that students must perceive the assessment methods to be credible and transparent.

The recent publication of HETAC³ Assessment and Standards policy document (which reflects ENQA⁴ policies and procedures) emphasises the importance and relevance of fair, valid, and transparent assessment strategies. ICEP participants noted that *“there is no legal requirement for us to teach in a certain way but there is a legal requirement for us to assess fair and consistently”*. However they also highlighted that traditional assessment methods can often allow for rote learning, question spotting and cramming, saying that *“a lot of people get through year by year having pretty much no real understanding of the subject because the assessment allows for question spotting or cramming for anyone who is relatively bright”*. Another issue raised was the relevance of assessment for different cohorts of students. For example, it was argued that the value of assessment for postgraduate students is questionable where the overall aim is to develop the skills needed for research. A concerning issue raised was *“does assessment kill passion”*, that is *“kill a natural ability for something”*.

The issue of over-assessment received significant consideration. Several arguments were put forward. On the one-hand it was argued that *“unless you assess something people don’t give attention to it”*. The argument that over-assessment kills passion was also put forward. Correctly proportioned authentic assessment as a possible remedy to this was noted. Learning outcomes only need to be assessed once and by clearly aligning outcomes and assessment, over-assessment can be identified and removed.

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HETAC Higher Education and Training Awards Council

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ENQA The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education

A method to help achieve this is Bigg's model of constructive alignment (Biggs (2003)). This model is also valuable in helping to identify real learning outcomes, a problem repeatedly discussed by ICEP participants

Teaching Methods

There was broad general consensus among participants regarding the key characteristics of effective teaching methods. These characteristics included engaging the learners; the use of technology to enhance the learning; and the vital role of student centric teaching. In engaging students, delegates believe they are aiding "*deeper learning*" and a "*deeper understanding of the topic*" which has the effect of encouraging students to remember what they have learned at a later stage in life and offers students "*a bridge to where they are going in real life*".

This thinking is reminiscent of Marton and Saljö's (1976) seminal work regarding surface and deep learning where they find deep engagement with learning brings about greater transformation and more meaningful learning. This is substantiated in the view of one participant who believes "*unless you engage your students you are not teaching*". Ramsden (2003, p.59-60) states "surface approaches (to learning) have nothing to do with wisdom, and everything to do with aimless accumulation...(in contrast) deep approaches are connected with the qualitatively superior outcomes which we associate with understanding a subject". Any occasion to involve the student in the learning is viewed as useful to engage them. Learning comes from allowing students to "*talk...and discuss in class...and make mistakes*". McKeachie (2007, p.36) purports in class discussion as an opportunity for "...students [to] pay attention and think more actively". This piece of inquiry revealed educators believe group discussions offer great opportunities to engage students and encourage interaction, "*...talking makes you think*".

The general consensus was that technology is only helpful if it underpins sound pedagogical practice. "*Technology is a multiplier....[it] may help you do it [teach] better but if what you were doing was ill advised in the first place technology will help you do it worse*". Technology is a teaching tool. It is not a replacement for teaching. The use of technology to enable or enhance the learning experience must be done so from a place of expertise and deep consideration.

Brenton supports this understanding of technology enabling learning and says of eLearning or blended learning, "...it is not something you deliver...it is something you enable your students to do" (in Fry et al, 2009, p.86). It was accepted that technology does, however, facilitate greater flexibility. In particular it was felt that "*certainly distance learning and e-learning*" offered flexibility of access to learning for mature students, with many other responsibilities and commitments competing for their time.

Technology offers learners instant access to information and should be viewed as an "enhancement and enlargement of the classroom" (Ebner, 2009, p.93). Technology should be viewed as one of the tools in the toolkit and used "*like the pencil and books were years ago*". Jordan et al (2008) draw a distinction between students learning 'with' technology rather than 'from' technology.

As discussed earlier in this paper (in the role of teachers), engaging learners requires student centric teaching activities and methodologies. Sotto (2007, p.127) purports the notion of having a theory of learning to inform a theory of teaching. He suggests a theory of learning that puts the learner "centre stage" where the learner takes responsibility for their own learning and the teacher acts a facilitator. Student centric teaching is summed up by one participant as "*...there should be something in there to suit everybody at some point*". If the mystery of how to teach is simply about engaging students through student-centric activities, then the question is; what are the most effective student-centric activities?

Leach and Moon (2008, p.66) say "the notion of participation is key in this paradigm [socially-situated learning] of learning, emphasizing learner's location and agency in the many and varied life-worlds to which they belong". Leach and Moon are advocating a broader view of "learner's trajectories" to include learners constructing meaning in relation to society and their own life's experience. In this way they view classrooms as "*complex social settings in which learning is jointly constructed*", joint construction between the educator and learner. Student-centric teaching is based on what the students "*need and want more than what I [the lecturer] prefer or believes in*".

Conclusions

Capturing the views of ICEP 2010 delegates proved to be most successful and enlightening. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the participant group, one of the most welcome outcomes was the level of passion and enthusiasm lecturers bring to the learning process. This passion and enthusiasm was not diminished despite the many challenges being faced by lecturers in higher education today. The difficulties facing ICEP 2010 delegates formed the basis for the ICEP 2011 themes. The motivation being that ICEP 2011 would provide a further shared forum for exploration and sharing possible solutions and pathways through these trials.

The ICEP 2011 theme is 'The Changing and Evolving Roles of Educators' with sub-themes such as 'responding to governmental policies; strategies for diversity; the value of technology; and student-centric pedagogy' included.

We started out on this journey with the question of how to differentiate ICEP from other pedagogical conferences whilst still contributing to the area. ICEP's unique characteristic will continue to be the opportunity it offers practitioners to have their voice heard. Practitioners, when given an opportunity were clearly both articulate and informed on a range of issues in Irish education.

The public voice of educators is critically important as demonstrated by the findings of this paper. The future challenge is encouraging the muted voice of their colleagues and peers to contribute to ongoing discourse at a seminal time in higher education. This is particular pertinent with the impending implementation of the Hunt report and the establishment of a National Academy for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning. The next phase of this study is to encourage the participants to dream of how the ICEP community can build on what has been successful to date and cooperatively create an environment that will provide a supportive space for educators to continue to shape the evolving landscape of higher education.

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